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Report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force for the period from 19 November 2015 to 29 February 2016

I. Introduction

1. The present report gives an account of the activities of the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF) during the past three months, pursuant to the mandate contained in Security Council resolution 350 (1974) and extended in subsequent resolutions, most recently resolution 2257 (2015).

II. Situation in the area and activities of the Force

2. During the reporting period, the ceasefire between Israel and the Syrian Arab Republic was maintained, albeit in a continuously volatile environment attributable to the ongoing conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic and notwithstanding a number of significant violations of the Agreement on Disengagement between Israeli and Syrian Forces (Disengagement of Forces Agreement) of 1974, which are set out below. The Syrian armed forces carried out military and security operations against non-State armed opposition groups, often in response to offensives carried out by armed groups in the area of separation and the area of limitation on the Bravo (Syrian) side. Inside the area of separation, the presence of the Syrian armed forces and military equipment, as well as any other armed personnel and military equipment other than that of UNDOF, is in violation of the Disengagement of Forces Agreement. As underscored by the Security Council in its resolution 2257 (2015), there should be no military activity of any kind in the area of separation.

3. In employing its best efforts to maintain the ceasefire and see that it is scrupulously observed, as prescribed in the Disengagement of Forces Agreement, UNDOF reports all breaches of the ceasefire line. All incidents of firing into the area of separation and across the ceasefire line, as well as the crossing of the ceasefire line by individuals, are violations of the Disengagement of Forces Agreement. In his regular interactions with both sides, the Force Commander continued to call upon both parties to exercise the utmost restraint and to prevent any miscalculations that might lead to an escalation of the situation across the ceasefire line.

4. A number of incidents of note occurred across the ceasefire line in violation of the Disengagement of Forces Agreement. On 13 January, United Nations personnel

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at observation post 51 observed two Israel Defense Forces (IDF) soldiers, who were part of an IDF foot patrol in the vicinity of the ceasefire line, enter the area of separation by about 75 metres and subsequently return to the Alpha side. On the same day, UNDOF personnel observed five IDF soldiers enter the area of separation by about 20 metres and shortly thereafter return to the Alpha side.

5. Crossing of the ceasefire line by civilians, primarily shepherds, from the Bravo side to the Alpha side was observed on an almost daily basis. On six separate occasions, United Nations personnel at observation post 54 observed interaction between IDF personnel and individuals from the Bravo side, some of whom were armed. Of note, on 19 November, United Nations personnel at observation post 54 observed interaction between IDF personnel and three unidentified individuals at the Israeli technical fence gate 200 metres from the post. On 21 December, United Nations personnel at observation post 54 observed IDF personnel transfer packages to unidentified individuals from the Bravo side at the same Israeli technical fence gate. On 17 January, UNDOF personnel at observation post 54 observed persons from the Bravo side driving one vehicle across the ceasefire line to an Israeli technical fence gate where an IDF soldier opened the gate. After 10 minutes at the gate, the vehicle drove off towards Mu'allaq on the Bravo side. Also on 31 January, UNDOF observed a truck being driven from the Bravo side through an Israeli technical fence gate into an IDF position in the vicinity of observation post 54. On 3 February, a small truck was observed stopping at the same Israeli technical fence gate for approximately 10 minutes and four individuals were observed loading it with items, after which the truck drove off towards Brudjum/Ayn Qadi on the Bravo side.

6. In the context of the Syrian conflict, fighting continued in the areas of separation and limitation on the Bravo side with varying degrees of intensity. Most of the fighting occurred in the central and southern parts of the areas of separation and limitation. The Syrian armed forces maintained their positions in the area of separation, particularly around the urban centres of Ba'th and Khan Arnabah and further consolidated their positions in the northern part around Hadar and the tri-village area of Jubbata, Trunjah and Ufana. In recent months, fighting between the Syrian armed forces and non-State armed opposition groups in the northern part of the area of separation has reduced in intensity, although the exchange of fire has continued, particularly in Hadar and the villages of Jubbata, Trunjah, Ufana and Ayn al-Bayda villages. In January, Syrian authorities and open sources reported that a local truce arrangement had been reached between the Syrian armed forces and non-State armed opposition groups in Jubbata, Trunjah, Ufana and Ayn al-Bayda villages and that the road linking these villages to Khan Arnabah had been reopened. Notwithstanding the reported truce arrangement, the continued exchange of fire demonstrates the volatility of the northern part of the area of separation and continues to bring into question the reported truce arrangement.

7. Further north, in the border area between the Syrian Arab Republic and Lebanon, on nine separate occasions UNDOF observed and reported transborder movements of unidentified individuals, some of whom were armed.

8. The Syrian armed forces further reinforced their positions along the main road connecting Qunaytirah to Damascus and generally deployed tanks at locations immediately adjacent to the area of separation. UNDOF observed armed groups using tanks in the area of separation. During recent periods of intense fighting,

UNDOF observed non-State armed opposition groups using tanks close to Qahtaniyah, New Hamidah and Ruwayhinah. Additionally, heavy artillery was used by non-State armed opposition groups in the vicinity of Ruwayhinah and close to vacated United Nations position 60A.

9. In the central part of the areas of separation and limitation, fighting between the Syrian armed forces and armed groups intensified, particularly towards the end of December and in January. On 17 January, UNDOF observed tracers, airburst rounds, multiple instances of small arms fire, dozens of heavy explosions and air strikes in the eastern parts of the areas of separation and limitation. On 29 January, non-State armed opposition groups launched an offensive with artillery, tanks and heavy machine guns against Syrian armed forces positions in Tall al-Kurum in the area of separation and in Jaba in the area of limitation. During the clashes, approximately 17 air strikes and 1,000 heavy explosions were observed.

10. Throughout the reporting period, fighting between al Nusrah Front and the Yarmouk Martyrs Brigade continued in the southern parts of the areas of separation and limitation. Following the alleged killing of a Yarmourk Martyrs Brigade leader and members in the town of Jamlah, intense clashes between the Yarmouk Martyrs Brigade and al Nusrah Front were reported in the vicinity of Abu Hasar, Abdali, Ayn Dhakrah, Abu Haratayn, Gadhir al-Bustan and Tasil in the area of limitation on the Bravo side. On 30 November, likely vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices were used against al Nusrah Front leadership figures in the village of Qahtaniyah, 600 metres from United Nations observation post 51. The Yarmouk Martyrs Brigade continued to conduct military training activities close to vacated United Nations observation post 80A.

11. UNDOF protested the presence of Syrian armed forces and equipment in the area of separation and the firing into the area of separation and within it. The Force Commander reiterated to the Syrian authorities the obligation of the Syrian armed forces to halt military operations in the area of separation and to cease firing from the area of limitation, stressing the importance of abiding by the terms of the Disengagement of Forces Agreement and of ensuring the safety and security of United Nations personnel on the ground.

12. On three occasions in December (once on 2 December and twice on 15 December), UNDOF observed armed and unarmed persons digging out and removing landmines in close proximity to United Nations position 80 near the ceasefire line.

13. During the reporting period, UNDOF observed up to five different locations where tents and other structures had been set up for internally displaced persons in the area of separation. UNDOF observed approximately 70 tents north-west of Ayshah village, straddling the ceasefire line close to United Nations position 80. UNDOF observed water tanks and limited infrastructure in the vicinity of the tents and also frequently observed small groups of civilians in the camp. In another tented camp located in an area along the ceasefire line close to the village of Buraykah, some 150 tents, wooden structures and containers were observed. Small numbers of civilians were observed intermittently in the camp. In addition, UNDOF observed approximately 130 tents and wooden structures along the access road leading to United Nations observation post 53. UNDOF observed 15 tents at a location straddling the Bravo line north-west of the village of Ayn Qadi and a reduction in the number of tents from seven to one in the centre of Kudnah in the area of

limitation. Owing to the closure of the established crossing point between the Alpha and Bravo sides since late August 2014, UNDOF is not currently in a position to facilitate, in cooperation with the International Committee of the Red Cross, humanitarian crossings, including a crossing for students, between the Alpha and the Bravo sides.

14. Since the temporary relocation of UNDOF from a number of positions in September 2014 and pending its full return to the area of separation, conditions permitting, the operations of the Force in its current configuration have remained the same. In that context, UNDOF has continued to maintain visibility, albeit in a modified manner, of the area of separation and the ceasefire line from its positions on Mount Hermon in the northern part of the area of separation and position 80 in the southern part, as well as position 22 on the Alpha side. UNDOF operations continued to be supported by the United Nations Truce Supervision Organization (UNTSO), who maintained five fixed and four temporary observation posts on the Alpha side. The focus of the activities of Observer Group Golan remained on around-the-clock static observation, investigations and situational analysis. Through Observer Group Golan, UNDOF continued to carry out fortnightly inspections of equipment and force levels in the area of limitation on the Alpha side. Liaison officers from the Alpha side accompanied the inspection teams. Inspections and mobile operations in the area of limitation on the Bravo side remained suspended because of the security situation. As in the past, the Force faced restrictions on its freedom of movement, and its inspection teams were denied access to some positions on the Alpha side.

15. On a number of occasions during the reporting period, United Nations personnel observed 155 mm artillery weapons on the Alpha side within 10 km of the ceasefire line, in positions and on flatbed trucks. On 20 November, an anti-tank missile-launching system was observed at an IDF position south of observation post 73. On 12 January, UNDOF personnel observed six M109 (155 mm artillery) self-propelled guns, and on 22 January five missile carriers 10 km from the ceasefire line. UNDOF and Observer Group Golan members also continued to experience some restrictions of movement on the Alpha side when entering and exiting United Nations observation posts 54 and 73, which are located east of the Israeli technical fence, as a result of delays by IDF in opening the technical fence gate. At the time of writing, new arrangements were put in place with regard to observation post 73, improving the situation in relation to the delays experienced by UNDOF troops and Observer Group Golan military observers at the technical fence gate. UNDOF troops continued to be deployed at United Nations observation posts 54 and 73, providing additional security and force protection to Observer Group Golan military observers. The relocation of the UNDOF temporary headquarters functions from the Sheraton Hotel in Damascus to the Yafour Hotel on the outskirts of Damascus was completed in December.

16. UNDOF, in consultation with the parties, continued to review the situation in the area of separation. The ultimate objective of the Force is to make a full return to the area of separation, when conditions permit. In recent months, UNDOF has assessed that, although the situation in the northern part of the area of separation remained volatile, the intensity in the fighting between the Syrian armed forces and armed groups had eased. In this regard, UNDOF imitated on-the-ground assessments of the conditions in the area of separation for a potential incremental return to the area. On 19 January, an UNDOF team carried out a preliminary fact-

finding visit to the Bravo side, namely, Camp Faouar, in the area of limitation, Khan Arnabah straddling the central part of the area of separation and position 32 in the area of separation. The visit was facilitated by the Syrian authorities. There were no security incidents along the route taken by the team from the temporary headquarters of UNDOF at Yafour Hotel to Camp Faouar, position 32 and Khan Aranabah. The team found Camp Faouar and position 32 guarded by the Syrian armed forces and that the Camp had sustained significant damage, including fire damage to many of its buildings, and there was evidence of looting having taken place. The team also found that position 32 showed signs of looting and associated destruction. The team did not find any visible indications of combat having occurred at either Camp Faouar or position 32 and found that a number of structures, including the perimeter walls and bunkers, were intact at both locations. UNDOF plans to conduct further fact-finding visits to the area of separation in order to assess conditions for a potential return.

17. UNDOF also continued to engage with the parties on practical arrangements to allow the Force to continue to maintain the ceasefire, monitor, verify and report on violations of the Disengagement of Forces Agreement and exercise its critical liaison functions with the parties in order to implement its mandate. In addition, UNDOF continued to engage with the parties on the use of technology, including technological enablers to enhance the observation and monitoring of the area of separation and the ceasefire line and to offset the loss of situational awareness as a result of its current configuration. The security conditions prevailing in the area of separation and the area of limitation on the Bravo side, as well as the lack of agreement on established crossing procedures on the Bravo side in the absence of the Quneitra crossing and temporary observation posts for the Force on the Alpha side, continue to hamper UNDOF operations.

18. UNDOF planning continued to focus on maintaining operational effectiveness to support and maintain the Force in its current configuration and under the prevailing conditions. The capabilities of UNDOF to carry out its mandate in a safe and secure manner were assessed in the military capability study that was conducted in October, with consultations and the corresponding report completed in November. The findings of the study focused primarily on command and control, force restructuring, observation capabilities and force protection. The key recommendations in the study included the operational optimization and self-sustainment of Mount Hermon positions and position 80; a reduction of some 70 troops from the logistics unit and the reconfiguration of the Force in order to strengthen its positions in the area of separation; enhancement of medical facilities at United Nations positions in the Mount Hermon area and at position 80; additional observation systems and armoured personnel carriers; an explosive ordnance disposal capability for Mount Hermon positions; and the optimization of the deployment of Observer Group Golan military observers. The appropriate political, security and Force conditions for a potential incremental return of UNDOF to the area of separation were also considered in the study.

19. UNDOF has continued its efforts to strengthen its positions in the Mount Hermon area, including upgrading communication services and accommodation and force protection measures at positions 12 and 12A. The group of 50 peacekeepers assigned to position 12A is fully operational. UNDOF completed the stocking of the logistics requirements and necessary winterization preparations for the positions.

United Nations position 80 was developed further with additional force protection measures and observation capabilities.

20. UNDOF continued to resupply its positions on Mount Hermon from Damascus. UNDOF convoys between Damascus and the Mount Hermon positions are conducted almost daily and with a Force security escort, accompanied by a liaison officer from the office of the Senior Syrian Arab Delegate. UNDOF continued to carry out contingency planning for the reinforcement and evacuation of United Nations positions and observation posts and to update its contingency planning for the relocation and evacuation of United Nations personnel on both the Alpha and Bravo sides, as well as in Damascus. UNDOF, through its Force reserve company, conducted regular rehearsals, exercises and training for all identified contingencies.

21. The implementation of risk mitigation measures continued at observation posts, positions, the operational base at Camp Ziouani, the UNDOF temporary headquarters at Yafour Hotel, the administrative office in Mazzah and the representational office in Damascus. Additional force protection measures have been completed at United Nations positions on Mount Hermon and position 80.

22. As at 26 February, UNDOF comprised 768 troops, including 23 women. Troops are currently deployed from Bhutan (2), the Czech Republic (3), Fiji (300), India (189), Ireland (151), Nepal (121) and the Netherlands (2). In addition, 77 military observers from UNTSO, including 3 women, assisted the Force in carrying out its tasks.

III. Implementation of Security Council resolution 338 (1973)

23. The Security Council, when deciding in its resolution 2257 (2015) to renew the mandate of UNDOF for a further period of six months, until 31 December 2015, called upon the parties concerned to immediately implement its resolution 338 (1973) and requested the Secretary-General to submit, at the end of the period, a report on developments in the situation and the measures taken to implement that resolution. The search for a peaceful settlement in the Middle East, in particular the efforts made at various levels to implement resolution 338 (1973), was dealt with in my report on the situation in the Middle East (A/70/353), submitted pursuant to General Assembly resolutions 69/24, on Jerusalem, and 69/25, on the Syrian Golan.

24. Since the discontinuation of indirect peace talks in December 2008, there have been no negotiations between the parties. The Syrian conflict is further reducing the prospects for their resumption and for progress towards peace between Israel and the Syrian Arab Republic. I look forward to a peaceful resolution of the conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic, in accordance with the implementation of Security Council resolution 2254 (2015) and the Geneva Communiqué, as well as the resumption of efforts towards a comprehensive, just and durable peace settlement in the Middle East, as called for by the Security Council in its resolution 338 (1973) and other relevant resolutions.

IV. Observations

25. I am deeply concerned about the violations of the Disengagement of Forces Agreement that have taken place. The fighting between the Syrian armed forces and armed groups, and between different armed groups in the area of separation and limitation on the Bravo side jeopardize the long-term ceasefire between Israel and the Syrian Arab Republic. It remains critical that the parties maintain liaison with UNDOF in the first instance to prevent any escalation of the situation across the ceasefire line. The mandate of UNDOF remains an important element in ensuring the stability of the region. For its part, the United Nations will spare no effort in ensuring that the long-held ceasefire between Israel and the Syrian Arab Republic continues to hold.

26. I am gravely concerned about the continuing deterioration of the security situation in the Syrian Arab Republic, its impact on the Syrian population and its potential implications for the stability of the region. These developments have continued to significantly affect the UNDOF area of operations. The presence of the Syrian armed forces and unauthorized military equipment in the area of separation is in violation of the Disengagement of Forces Agreement. The increased use of heavy weapons by the Syrian armed forces and non-State armed opposition groups, as well as listed terrorist groups, in the continuing Syrian conflict, including air power by government forces in the area of limitation on the Bravo side, is disturbing. I note with concern the increasing presence and use of tanks and heavy weapons by the Syrian armed forces and by non-State armed opposition and listed terrorist groups in the area of separation. Non-State armed opposition groups and listed groups continue to maintain control over significant sections of the areas of separation and limitation in the southern part of the UNDOF area of operations and remain present along the section of the main road connecting the two UNDOF camps. The established crossing between the Alpha and Bravo sides remains closed.

27. There should be no military forces in the area of separation other than those of UNDOF. I urge the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic to stop the use of air strikes. I call upon all parties to the Syrian conflict to respect the nationwide cessation of hostilities in accordance with Security Council resolution 2268 (2016), cease military actions in the UNDOF area of operations and remove all military equipment and all armed personnel from the area of separation.

28. IDF should cease to deploy unauthorized weapons and equipment in the area of limitation on the Alpha side. In addition, the breaches of the ceasefire line by IDF soldiers have the potential to escalate tensions between the two sides.

29. I call upon countries with influence to strongly and urgently convey to the armed groups in the UNDOF area of operations the need to cease any actions in violation of the Disengagement of Forces Agreement between Israel and the Syrian Arab Republic that jeopardize the safety and security of United Nations personnel, and to accord United Nations personnel the freedom to carry out their mandate safely and securely. I remain concerned about the several incidents that have jeopardized United National personnel and facilities. Any hostile act against United Nations personnel, including threatening their physical safety, restricting their movement and direct and indirect firing at United Nations personnel and facilities by anyone, is unacceptable. The safety and security of United Nations personnel must be ensured. I reiterate that all military activities in the area of separation

carried out by any actor pose a risk to the ceasefire and to the local civilian population, in addition to United Nations personnel on the ground. I call upon all parties to take all measures necessary to protect civilians.

30. The primary responsibility for the safety and security of United Nations personnel in the areas of separation and limitation on the Bravo side rests with the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic.

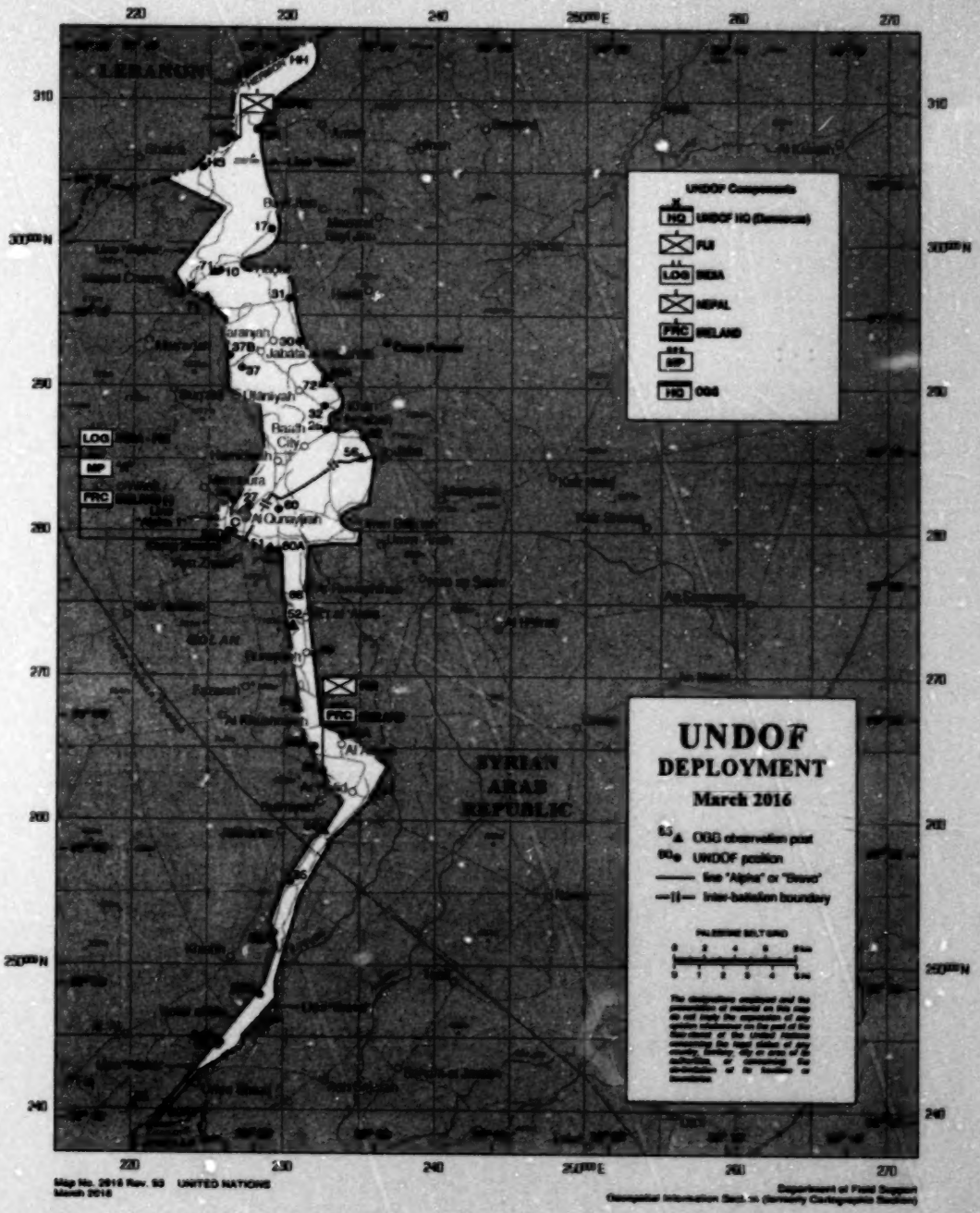
31. The continued presence of UNDOF in the area remains essential. Both Israel and the Syrian Arab Republic have stated their continued commitment to the Disengagement of Forces Agreement and the presence of UNDOF. I call upon both parties to assist UNDOF in achieving its interim configuration and deployment as quickly as possible to ensure that the mission is in a position to implement its mandate effectively, until such time as conditions allow it to make a full return to the area of separation. I note the assistance provided by the Governments of Israel and the Syrian Arab Republic in facilitating the provision of essential supplies in support of the Force. I also call upon the parties to continue supporting UNDOF in its reconfiguration efforts and to address the pending administrative, logistic and operational aspects, including the established efficient temporary procedures for the crossing between the Alpha and Bravo sides by mission personnel in the absence of the crossing at Qunaytirah. It remains critical for UNDOF to have the necessary technology and equipment to enhance its observation of the area of separation and the ceasefire line, and to improve force protection. The full return of UNDOF to the area of separation remains a priority for the mission. In planning and preparing for such a return, the safety and security of United Nations personnel remains the primary consideration in determining the exact modalities.

32. It is equally critical that the Security Council continue to bring its influence to bear on the parties concerned to ensure that UNDOF is accorded the ability to operate in a safe and secure manner, and freely. It is essential that UNDOF continue to have at its disposal all means and resources necessary to enable it to make a full return to the area of separation as the situation permits. The implementation of the recommendations contained in the military capability study of UNDOF will enable UNDOF to maximize its operational effectiveness in its current configuration and contribute to the mission's efforts in assessing the conditions for potential return to the area of separation.

33. The confidence and commitment of troop-contributing countries with regard to UNDOF remain a key factor for the mission's ability to continue to carry out its mandate. I am grateful to the Governments of Bhutan, the Czech Republic, Fiji, India, Ireland, Nepal and the Netherlands for their contributions, their commitment and their resolve. I am also thankful to the Member States contributing military observers to UNTSO.

34. In conclusion, I wish to express my appreciation to Lieutenant General Purna Chandra Thapa, who completed his tour of duty with UNDOF on 7 February, for his dedicated leadership and commitment during his tenure as UNDOF Head of Mission and Force Commander. I also wish to express my gratitude to the military and civilian personnel serving in UNDOF, who continue to perform the important tasks assigned to them by the Security Council with efficiency and commitment under challenging circumstances. I have full confidence that UNDOF will continue to use its best efforts to carry out its mission.

Annex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UNDOF Components
HQ UNDOF HQ (Damascus)
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OBS observation post
UNDOF position
line "Alpha" or "Bravo"
Inter-battalion boundary
Map No. 3916 Rev. 69 UNITED NATIONS
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